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## ENGLISH WORK IN A PRIVATE SCHOOL

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Most of the articles in the *English Journal* have set forth or discussed the instruction given in English in the public schools. What has been said has often referred especially to the college-preparatory course. This is natural, since what is said meets the needs of a large number of teachers and students. There are, however, schools whose special work is not to prepare students for college, but to send them directly from school with some adequate preparation for life. I have an intimate knowledge of the English work done in one such school, and I should like, therefore, to set forth the means used there for training girls in self-expression—means which seem to me unique in that they allow for both thoroughness and breadth.

I have said that the work seems to me to be thorough. I have seen it stated in the *English Journal* that very often a student shows lack of interest in his work because he is discouraged by the criticism of too many details. There may be differences in the students with which one has to deal, but among those in this school, I know of no case in which improvement in carefulness of detail has not brought with it a corresponding improvement in the quality of the mental product. I am, therefore, glad to state that, irrespective of age or years spent in the school, every girl who writes or spells poorly must be in a class in spelling, or in writing, or in both. She must be in a daily or a weekly class, according to the measure of her deficiency. So long as she is in the school, no girl is allowed to pass out of writing or of spelling until the report of every teacher for whom she does written work is favorable. Before a girl is allowed to go into rhetoric or any literature course, she must have passed a satisfactory examination in English grammar. Here grammar is taught in the last two years of the preparatory

school. In these three ways, then, the foundation of the English work is laid thoroughly.

Before I continue what I have to say, I find it necessary to explain the arrangement of the schedule, and the study-hour. What are called the classes for the major subjects meet on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday. On Friday, the classes are all changed. On this day, no matter how long she is in the school, every girl must be a member of a composition class and of a current-news class, and before she leaves the school, she must have been for one year a member of the parliamentary law class. This means that, irrespective of any other work which she may do, each girl must each week produce some written work which will be read and criticized; that she must each week stand before an audience of thirty or forty people and talk for from one to three minutes on some interesting event of the past week, and that for one year she must once each week be a member of a class the aim of which is to familiarize the students with the ordinary forms of parliamentary procedure and to enable them to give suitable expression to opinions on one side or another of a question. There is another point, also, which needs explanation. There is, each regular school day, a study-hour from four to six and on Saturday morning there is a study-period from nine to ten. The daily study-time is divided into four half-hour periods. To be prepared for a lesson, each girl must have spent a half-hour in study for each subject. Though this arrangement may seem an arbitrary one, the good results gained justify the plan: that there is only one half-hour allowed for preparation and that in order to gain the best credit for a lesson a half-hour must have been spent on it, immediately bring a necessity for concentration. There are, governing the discipline of the classroom and the study-hour, what are called communication rules. According to these, no girl may, during the classroom or study periods, communicate with any other girl by word, look, or manner. Thus it is that each girl finds it necessary to attend wholly to the business of the moment. The hour of study on Saturday morning is devoted exclusively to theme work and on that morning there is a pervasive atmosphere of production.

A special point in the matter of thoroughness is that a whole

year is devoted to the study of rhetoric. As I have said before, each girl before she is admitted to a rhetoric class must have passed a satisfactory examination in grammar. The object of the work in rhetoric is to inspire the girls to good effort in expressing themselves efficiently both in speech and in writing. There is, in connection with these classes, scarcely a day in the year when each girl is not called upon to express herself to some definite purpose. The work usually begins with making a paragraph analysis of one of Stevenson's narrative accounts of his interesting experiences. Then for six weeks special attention is given to the study of the paragraph as a unit. During that time four or five paragraphs are assigned to be written each week. With each paragraph must be handed in a statement, in one concise sentence, of the thought which was intended to be developed in the paragraph. This gives an opportunity for judging how effectively the paragraph develops the idea and for determining readily the strong or weak points therein. I require always a statement which does not begin with "My purpose is to tell" or "This paragraph is to show." A direct statement of the thought to be developed necessarily clarifies the idea. As soon as the students have gained an intelligent grasp of a paragraph as an organic structure, an abridgment is made of a chapter in Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey*. The way in which the abridgment is made is by writing in a well-constructed and concise sentence the gist of each paragraph. After this is done, the students are instructed to write also in one concise sentence the larger purpose of the whole chapter. They have, then, before them, stated in a sentence, the thought of the whole extract, and also in sentences the thought of each paragraph as a part of the larger thought. With relation to this purpose and plan, the original may then be examined to see how effectively the thought has been brought out by means of good paragraph structure. This exercise is repeated several times. The next theme written must be on a subject capable of development in several paragraphs, and it must be accompanied by a purpose and a plan—a purpose stating in one concise sentence the thought of the whole, and a plan in which each paragraph is represented by one concise sentence stating the part of the larger thought which is developed in each paragraph. Every

theme written hereafter in the school must be accompanied by "a purpose and a plan." Before long, this requirement becomes a habit, and a help to clear thinking and effective expression. After these things are made plain by sufficient practice, several longer narrative and descriptive themes of six to eight hundred words are written. The practical and interesting suggestions made in *English Composition* by Baker and Abbott are given the class as guidance. Each time some special point is to be striven for. The difficult thing which I find in the beginning is to convince the students that no writer, however young or old, can tell us anything that she does not know herself. They may be given reproductive work to develop their power of grasping and expressing thought, and imitative work to develop facility. But it is constantly set before them by precept and example that what is written gains an interest both for the writer and for others in proportion as she uses for her material what she knows of other people and of herself.

The class time for two months is spent in studying sentence construction. The exercises in Carpenter's *Elements of Rhetoric* are used, and the work made practical both by frequent oral themes and by criticism and revision of the sentence structure in the regular weekly themes.

After the narrative and descriptive themes become more interesting and more carefully constructed, attention is turned to exposition. While the pupils are reading *Travels with a Donkey*, there are required, by way of review, oral themes, which have for their object the explanation of the principles of paragraph structure from specific paragraphs in the chapter assigned; of the variety of Stevenson's sentence structure as observed in some special chapter; of his observance of the principles of narration and description, and later of the characteristics of Stevenson as a man and as a writer.

The reward for good work comes in the last six weeks or two months of the year when the students are given some vacation from their persistent writing and are allowed to read in Stevenson. They report daily on what they have read. They read *The Life of Robert Louis Stevenson* by Graham Balfour, the *Letters* edited by Sidney Colvin, the novels, the poems, and the essays. In con-

nection with the daily reports there arise many interesting class discussions on observations made while reading. Each girl must, while reading, make observations in connection with some special subjects—the author's original turns of expression, his use of specific words, his evident pride in being a Scotsman, his tolerance, his courage, his youthful spirit.

The opportunity to read widely in Stevenson arouses much enthusiasm. *Travels with a Donkey* has in it such an atmosphere of genuineness, of effort to suggest to the reader the real experiences, that the reading and the discussion of it afford constantly practical illustration and inspires the students to emulate the ease and interest of style and to discover within the range of their own experience things which would be worth telling. In the range of Stevenson's writing there is to be found good illustration for all kinds of writing. When the transition is to be made from narrative and description to exposition, his narrative *A Lodging for the Night*, read in connection with his essay on *François Villon*, makes clear the distinction between the two. The writings of Stevenson seem especially adapted to arouse enthusiasm at this time: he breathes the spirit of youth; he writes with genuineness and simplicity and charm; he uses his own experiences. The girls end by agreeing that it has been a satisfaction to learn to know an author both as a teacher and as a companion.

The textbooks used for the work in rhetoric are, as I have already indicated, *Elements of Rhetoric* by Carpenter and *English Composition* by Baker and Abbott. These I have chosen on account of the small amount of text and the practical value of what there is. By the use of duplicate copies of other textbooks in the library and typewritten work, there is much other material which can be used according to the needs of the class. Throughout the year two hours of class work and four of preparation are required.

I have thus fully outlined the work done in rhetoric because I feel sure that the emphasis given to expression work at this period vitalizes and develops appreciation in the three years of literature work to follow. Many girls come to us from high schools and from other preparatory schools where the work in English has been done in connection with a college-preparatory course. Where a girl

expresses herself poorly, questioning usually reveals the fact that she has had some training in rhetoric, but that this training has usually been put aside for the sake of getting the content of the books necessary for college-entrance examinations. Since a whole year is devoted to expression its importance is so emphasized that in most cases careful speaking and easy writing become habitual.

As a special training in oral composition, there are in the school four splendid opportunities. One is through the current events classes, which meet each Friday. The students take daily papers—ones approved by the teachers—and the majority of them take also the *Independent*, the *Outlook*, or the *Literary Digest*. Sometimes a girl is asked to report each Friday for several weeks in succession on one topic of interest; sometimes she is asked to reproduce some article of special importance. Largely, however, the girls are left to choose for themselves what they will recite upon, and in their choice, they learn to know what news is of temporary and what of more enduring value. No matter how long a girl is in the school, she must on each Friday be a member of a current events class. Each girl, if present, is called upon three times during the month, and often she recites every Friday. These classes are held in the assembly room. The girl rises at her desk to speak. Thus she is, as it were, addressing a public assembly on some matter of interest. The classes are conducted with the formality of a public meeting. Since the girls never graduate from these classes, if they remain in the school three, four, or five years, they must of necessity gain in ease and fluency of expression.

Another opportunity is given in a class which meets each Friday. It is the custom of the school that each girl for one year before she leaves shall be a member of the parliamentary law class. The aim in the class is to familiarize the student with the ordinary forms of parliamentary procedure, to prepare her to take part in the activities of a club, and to enable her to give suitable expression of opinion on one side or another of the various topics that come up for discussion. The result is, with few exceptions, the realization of this aim. The formal procedure is grasped with comparative ease; the offices are discharged with dignity and a quickly acquired sense of fitness. Even in those to whom self-expression

is an effort, there is, during the year, a noticeable gain in that difficult but necessary accomplishment of thinking while standing and of expressing a thought with force and conviction.

There is also another opportunity for development in efficiency of expression, given by a class called a criticism class and conducted by the dean of one of the large New York universities. In connection with this class six books are read during the year. Last year the girls read *Henry Esmond*, *The Mill on the Floss*, *Sense and Sensibility*, Mr. Meredith Nicholson's *A Hoosier Chronicle*, and two of his short plays, Mr. Arnold Bennett's *The Honeymoon*, and Mr. Booth Tarkington's *Beauty and the Jacobin*. The object of the class is to establish some standard as to the real worth of the books read. To this end some of the books chosen are classics and others are those published recently. The questions to be discussed are posted on the board three or four weeks before the class is to meet, and each girl in the school is assigned one special question. Six girls are appointed to open the discussion. The others are called on at the will of the professor conducting the class. The matter presented in each discussion is summed up and commented upon by the professor. This class is held in the evening before an assembly of the whole school and the faculty. The girls who read papers read them from the platform. Those who open discussions stand to speak wherever they happen to be in the schoolroom. Conducted as they are by a man who readily turns to account even thoughts poorly expressed, these classes develop a poise and a capacity for expression which is most desirable.

Once every week and often twice, speakers of interest come to us. These lectures or talks are reported upon by the students. There is also a dramatic club supervised by one of the faculty. On Friday evening six or seven times during the year plays are given by the girls. Sometimes, on one evening, plays written by the girls are presented. This possibility of presentation provides an incentive for good effort in the theme classes.

So far I have dealt with the opportunities for oral expression of thought aside from the attention given in each daily recitation. I have also to explain the attention given to written expression. I have already stated that, no matter how long a girl is in the



school, she must on each Friday be a member of a theme class. During the first year of her work, she must each week spend two hours in written work. The themes are assigned each week, are narrative, descriptive, and expository, and are usually from six hundred to eight hundred words in length. In the second, third, fourth, and fifth years, the student must each week spend an hour on her written work. The themes in the second year are almost wholly expository and have to do chiefly with the English literature work. In the third year emphasis is laid on good constructive work. The themes are descriptive, largely with a view to setting; narrative-dialogues, personal experience, short stories; expository, based on individual knowledge. They also include sonnets and other verses and oral reports on reading in the library and on lectures. In the fourth and fifth years a girl may specialize in English and take a daily class in theme work. Such a course offers opportunity for two classes of girls—those who have talent in writing and those who do advanced work in other directions but who still find difficulty in expressing themselves with ease and efficiency. There are, of course, in connection with psychology and history of art and history and literature, papers given as a means of review. These provide additional opportunity for giving corporate expression to impressions gained by study, and are often looked over by the English teacher and criticized from the standpoint of structure.

The literature courses cover a period of four years. The last year in the preparatory school is devoted to the study of American literature. There are two years of English literature and two years of general literature. In the English literature Symond's *English Literature* is used as a guide, supplemented by talks and reading in the library. The object of the course is to gain an intelligent knowledge of the history of literature and to read as many representative works as possible. In the general literature courses the object is the same. Information is given the classes in lectures and the reading done is extensive and thorough. Since I cannot attempt within short space to do justice to the work in literature I must dismiss it with these unsatisfactory statements. The main object of the paper has been to outline rather fully the attention given to oral and written expression.